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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BELGRADE 000172

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [NATO](#) [MASS](#) [SR](#)
SUBJECT: DEFMIN PLEDGES WARM MIL/MIL TIES DESPITE POLITICAL
CHILL

REF: A. BELGRADE 158

[1](#)B. BELGRADE 160

Classified By: Ambassador Michael C. Polt, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (c) In an unexpected tour d'horizon with the Ambassador February 2, DEFMIN Zoran Stankovic pledged that the MoD and the Serbian military would continue to work on broadening and deepening Euro-Atlantic ties despite PM Kostunica's recent harsh political rhetoric (ref a). He said the military would not interfere on Kosovo and would continue to "do its part" on ICTY cooperation, and pledged support for CHOD Ponos despite some bitterness over an appointment process that left him out of the loop. The Ambassador encouraged Stankovic to continue his leadership, contrasting it with the feckless posturing from Serbia's senior political ranks. End summary.

POLICY - KOSOVO, A3, AND RELATIONS WITH THE ALLIANCE

[1](#)2. (c) Moments from boarding a plane for a whirlwind trip to Tallinn and Munich to talk to USG and European policy makers about Serbia's future relationship with the NATO alliance and Serbia's defense reform efforts, DEFMIN Zoran Stankovic unexpectedly called in the Ambassador for a tour d'horizon. Contrary to normal practice, Stankovic had only minimal staff in the meeting - his personal aide and a translator. The DEFMIN admitted to being somewhat out of sorts over the prospect of facing hard questions from Alliance members about Serbia's intentions vis-a-vis its relations with NATO, especially in light of PM Kostunica's most recent pronouncements about "serious consequences" to Serbia's relationship with NATO in the event that a NATO member recognizes Kosovo independence.

[1](#)3. (c) Stankovic told the Ambassador he had nothing of substance to add to the official position on the Ahtisaari plan. He noted only that the negotiations surrounding the plan are for state entities, and that the military and the MoD would not get involved - he pledged that the military would behave responsibly whatever the status outcome. On a personal level, though, he criticized Kostunica's harsh rhetoric. He said Serbia had already spent too much time in isolation, and the country doesn't need that any more. Leaders, he said, had to be able to talk to each other to solve problems, and isolation was not the answer. Stankovic also touched briefly on ICTY, pledging the continued best efforts of the military "within the range circumstances allow us."

[1](#)4. (c) Looking forward to his Tallinn meeting, Stankovic said he was still weighing the relative benefits of either trying to merge into the existing A3 structure, or to instead propose a "B3" alignment of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Montenegro, arguing that these countries might be better put together to move forward at their own pace, rather than

trying to latch onto A3 members like Croatia who were already far ahead of Serbia in the accession process.

PERSONNEL ISSUES

15. (c) Stankovic reiterated his full support for CHOD Ponos, noting that they had worked together well both before and after Ponos' appointment. Stankovic did register some residual bitterness over the process by which Ponos was appointed, seeing it as a deliberate attempt to cut him out of the loop by taking the action while he was out of the country on business. Stankovic bemoaned the arrogance of Tadic's defense advisors, noting that their interference (and subsequent boasting about town) had caused him problems with the media and in the ranks over the appointment, problems he said could have been avoided if the appointment process had been allowed to take its course. He noted, for example, that as a result of the hue and cry from the general staff and the officer corps over the appointment process for Ponos, he had been forced to delay promised retirements of some other senior generals in order to calm the mood in the ranks.

AMBASSADOR - HELP US HELP YOU

16. (c) The Ambassador thanked Stankovic for his candor, and reiterated the USG's commitment to moving forward aggressively with Serbia's military and MoD leadership to cement our bilateral and multi-lateral security ties. The Ambassador highlighted the GLOC, the State Partnership Program with Ohio, SOFA implementation, and IMET as examples of areas where the USG is pushing hard to do more with Serbia. He noted, though, that our ability to support Stankovic's leadership is being more constrained every day by negative statements from Kostunica that threaten our joint strategic goal of closer relations for Serbia with the US and

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NATO. The PM's rhetoric, he said, is closely followed in Washington and would have a chilling effect on Serbia's relationships with its natural allies. This path, the Ambassador emphasized, amounts to self-imposed isolation, and he welcomed Stankovic's assertion that this is not a future Serbia needs.

17. (c) On ICTY, the Ambassador expressed his expectation that the political leadership would show the will to arrest senior PIFWC's and give the operational agencies the support they need to complete their work. The Ambassador declined to comment on the process of Ponos' appointment, but reaffirmed our strong support for him and noted that the appointment was important for moving Serbia forward on security cooperation, and agreed it should not be held hostage to petty politics. In a similar vein, the Ambassador urged Stankovic to encourage swift approval of Serbia's PfP Presentation Document (PD) by the PM's office, noting it would both open more doors for cooperation and give the PM and President Tadic a chance to show where they stand on Alliance relations. Stankovic said the MoD is ready to move it forward, but said MFA is holding up the process (see ref b). He predicted Kostunica would approve the current PD draft without much change or fuss.

COMMENT

18. (c) This meeting was unexpected, coming just minutes before Stankovic was slated to fly to Tallinn for the A3 meetings. The lack of staff attending and the broad range of strategic issues covered gave it the feeling of a farewell call. Given the messiness of the ongoing coalition negotiations and the nebulous status of the Defense Ministry absent a new and fully implemented constitution, Stankovic may well sense his time is short. Stankovic has been a surprisingly forward-thinking and professional DEFMIN, and has moved forward many of our most important security issues. As the Ambassador told Stankovic, it is unfortunate that his kind of leadership and strategic thinking is missing from

many in the country's senior leadership.
POLT